

Constructing a University EFL Textbook Model for Critical Thinking Development: A Case Study in Media, Arts, and Design Disciplines

Linqiang Guo

College of Humanities, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, China

Abstract

In response to the deficiencies in critical thinking training, disconnection from disciplinary content, and fragmented topics prevalent in current University English textbooks, particularly for students in Media, Arts, and Design, this study constructs an innovative textbook design model. Grounded in Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Project-Based Learning (PjBL), the model proposes organizing an entire textbook around a sequenced "Grand Creative Project" central to the discipline. Each unit constitutes a phase of this project, with content logically interconnected and cognitive demands progressively deepening. Using the example of "Curating a Virtual Art Exhibition on 'Selfie Culture'", this paper elaborates on how the model integrates language learning, disciplinary knowledge construction, and critical thinking development through five sequenced units: Thematic Inquiry, Curatorial Research, Narrative Design, Curatorial Rationale, and Promotion. This model provides a theoretical framework and practical pathway for developing new EFL textbooks that effectively cultivate critical thinking, creative expression, and cross-cultural communication skills for students in arts and design fields.

Keywords

Critical Thinking, Textbook Design, Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Media, Arts, and Design, English for Academic Purposes.

1. Introduction

The core objective of University English teaching in the new era has shifted from solely imparting language skills to fostering students' cross-cultural communication competence and global literacy. This is especially crucial for students in Media, Arts, and Design disciplines, whose future careers demand not only an understanding of global creative works and theoretical discourses but also the ability to articulate their creative concepts, engage in profound art criticism, and effectively pitch their projects in English. However, prevailing general English textbooks often suffer from a disconnect from disciplinary content, fragmented topics, and a lack of systematic critical thinking training (Gong, 2010) [1], failing to support this advanced goal.

To address this challenge, this paper proposes a fundamental paradigm shift in textbook design: from "teaching materials" serving general language purposes to "project practice manuals" serving disciplinary thinking and practice. The textbook model constructed in this study deeply integrates the focus on disciplinary knowledge systems from Content-Based Instruction (CBI) with the drive for authentic problem-solving and product creation from Project-Based Learning (PjBL), placing both within a framework of a sequenced, progressively deepening "Grand Project". This model aims to create an immersive learning experience where students develop academic English proficiency, disciplinary cognition, and critical thinking skills synergistically through the completion of a coherent disciplinary project.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Integrating Critical Thinking with Foreign Language Education

Critical thinking is a core objective of higher education. Facione's (1990) [2] Delphi Report defines it as a composite of cognitive skills (e.g., interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation) and affective dispositions (e.g., curiosity, open-mindedness). In the Chinese context, Wen Qiufang's (2009, 2012) [3, 4] hierarchical model and its corresponding instruments provide crucial guidance for cultivating and assessing critical thinking. She pointedly notes that the absence of critical thinking among foreign language majors is a bottleneck hindering their professional development. Systematically integrating critical thinking training into textbooks, rather than treating it as a supplementary activity, is an urgent priority.

2.2. Content-Based Instruction: Providing Cognitive and Linguistic Scaffolding

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is an approach that grounds language teaching in the learning of subject matter content (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003) [5]. Its core principle is that language acquisition is most effective when learners' attention is focused on meaningful content. CBI has been shown to significantly enhance student motivation, language skills, and content knowledge (Stoller & Robinson, 2018) [6]. For arts and design students, coupling English learning with the theories, case studies, and history of their own discipline immediately provides a sense of purpose and relevance, supplying the necessary knowledge base and semantic field for higher-order thinking activities.

2.3. Project-Based/Problem-Based Learning: The Engine Driving Critical Thinking

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is a student-centered pedagogy organized around a complex, authentic, long-term inquiry task, culminating in a tangible product (Thomas, 2000) [7]. It is closely related to Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which emphasizes driving new learning through solving ill-structured problems (Barrows, 1996) [8]. PBL/PjBL simulates the real-world workflow of professionals, naturally requiring students to employ higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation (Hmelo-Silver, 2004) [9]. In the media, arts, and design fields, this corresponds directly to the complete creative cycle from ideation, research, and planning to execution and reflection.

2.4. Summary and Research Gap

While existing research has separately validated the value of CBI and PjBL in promoting language and thinking development, most efforts remain at the course or unit level. At the scale of an entire textbook, how to construct a model for specific disciplines (like Media, Arts, and Design) that uses a sequenced Grand Project as its backbone to organically integrate CBI and PjBL remains an under-explored area. This study aims to fill this gap.

3. A Project-Based, Sequenced Textbook Model for Media, Arts, and Design Majors

The core of this model is a restructuring of the top-level architecture, as illustrated in the following diagram:

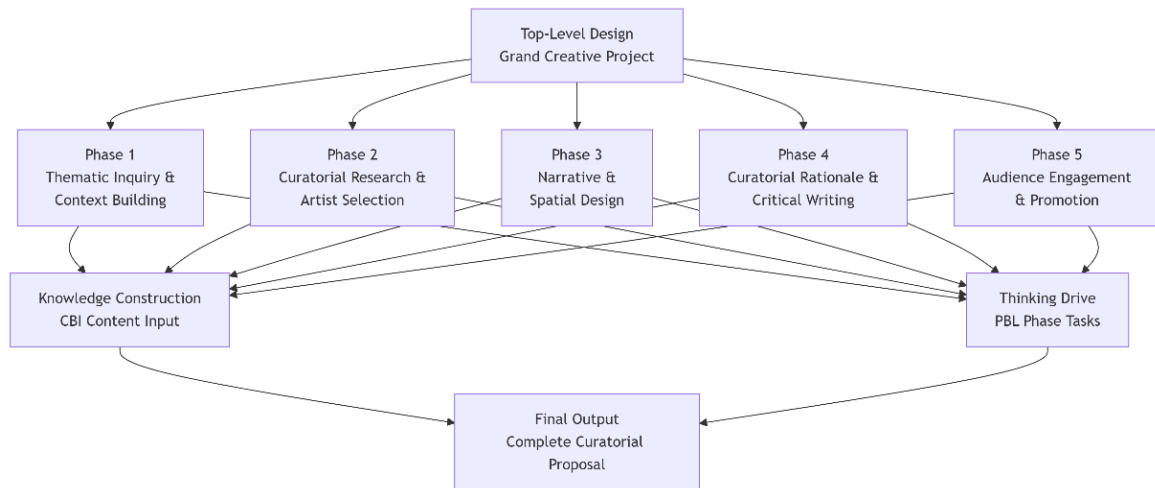


Figure 1: Textbook Model

3.1. Top-Level Design: The Grand Creative Project and Sequenced Chapters

Disciplinary Anchoring: Textbook content is deeply focused on core issues in Media, Arts, and Design, such as visual culture, media theory, narratology, and design ethics.

The Grand Project: The entire textbook revolves around an authentic, complex "Grand Creative Project." This project must be decomposable into a series of logical, interdependent stage tasks. Examples include:

Sample Project: Plan and promote a virtual international exhibition on "Sustainable Fashion".

Sample Project: Create a transmedia narrative campaign for a designated classic art film, targeting Generation Z.

Sequenced Chapters: As shown in the figure, each unit of the textbook constitutes a critical phase of the Grand Project, forming a complete "project lifecycle" from concept to implementation.

3.2. Integration Mechanism of Core Elements

CBI Content Modules: Provide rigorous disciplinary content input for each phase, sourced from:

Theoretical Texts: Excerpts on visual culture, identity politics, media ecology, etc.

Case Studies: In-depth analyses of renowned international art projects, design works, and advertising campaigns.

Industry Materials: Artist statements, curatorial proposals, design briefs, project pitches.

Multimedia Materials: Films, videos of art installations, design sketches, social media content.

PjBL Driving Task Chain: The stage task in each unit is a "disciplinarily authentic problem" that drives current learning. Task design follows cognitive principles, moving from understanding and analysis, to evaluation and creation, and finally requiring synthesis and application.

Embedding Critical Thinking: The cultivation of critical thinking is no longer abstract but concretized into the skills required in the arts and media fields—critical interpretation, cultural analysis, aesthetic judgment, ethical reasoning, and conceptual argumentation—which are repeatedly honed and deepened through the sequenced tasks.

4. Model Application Example: "Curating a Virtual Art Exhibition"

The Grand Project for the Textbook: "The Mirror of Identity": Curate an online virtual art exhibition focusing on "Selfie Culture," and produce a complete curatorial proposal and promotion plan.

Sequenced Chapter Design:

Unit 1: Thematic Inquiry and Context Building

Content Input: Read art theory literature on "identity" and "selfies"; analyze works by relevant artists (e.g., Cindy Sherman).

Driving Task: Write a curatorial theme statement analyzing the relationship between selfie culture and contemporary identity, and arguing for its value as an exhibition theme.

Critical Thinking Focus: Interpretation and Analysis.

Unit 2: Curatorial Research and Artist Selection

Content Input: Study curatorial research methods; browse global artist portfolios; read art criticism.

Driving Task: Based on the theme, research and select 8-10 artists' works. Submit a selection report evaluating how each artist's work responds to the exhibition theme.

Critical Thinking Focus: Evaluation and Argumentation.

Unit 3: Narrative and Spatial Design

Content Input: Learn about exhibition narratology, virtual space design principles; research online exhibition platforms.

Driving Task: Design the exhibition's narrative flow and virtual gallery layout. Write a display outline explaining the logic behind the artwork arrangement.

Critical Thinking Focus: Synthesis and Creation.

Unit 4: Exhibition Rationale and Critical Writing

Content Input: Analyze exemplary curatorial rationales and exhibition guides.

Driving Task: Write a comprehensive curatorial rationale, providing in-depth analysis of key artworks and responding to potential academic critiques.

Critical Thinking Focus: Constructing Complex Argumentation and Self-Regulation.

Unit 5: Audience Engagement and Promotion

Content Input: Research social media strategies and public engagement plans of cultural institutions.

Driving Task: Develop an integrated marketing communication plan, including a social media content calendar and a plan for an online opening event. Justify the effectiveness of the strategy.

Critical Thinking Focus: Creative Problem-Solving and Evaluation.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The project-based, sequenced textbook model for Media, Arts, and Design disciplines constructed in this paper represents a theoretical exploration into the specialized and in-depth reform of University English teaching. By reconceptualizing the textbook as a "Grand Creative Project," it fully immerses English learning within disciplinary cognition and practice, thereby providing the most fertile ground for critical thinking development. In this process, students practice not only language but also the core working methods of their field—from critical research and aesthetic judgment to creative communication.

Implementing this model requires textbook developers to possess interdisciplinary vision and prompts teachers to transition from "language lecturers" to "project collaborators" and "thinking coaches." Future research should focus on developing specific textbook units based on this model and conducting pedagogical empirical studies, as well as exploring its application in various sub-fields of arts and design (e.g., animation, game design). The ultimate goal is to cultivate a new generation of arts and media talents who can effectively articulate Chinese creative stories and engage in global dialogue in English.

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